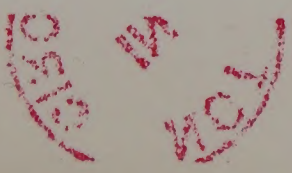
The Winner

Romance

Peg Kehret



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The Winner

by

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For Pamela Hall Kehret
Who helps her students become winners

The Winner

1

Bart saw the van on a Friday. It was raining and it wasn't yet light out when he ran past Lisa's house. Bart ran ten miles every day before he went to school, no matter what the weather was. Sometimes it was hard to drag himself out of bed, but then he would think about going to the state meet, and would make himself get up and into his sweats and out the door.

State. The State High School Track Meet, where the best athletes from every school compete. Bart's track coach, Mr. Peters, had told him that if he trained every day, he would not only make it to state this year, he could win the cross-country race.

Last year, when Bart was in tenth grade, he missed going to state by less than two seconds. He finished just behind Andy Smithson. Andy Smithson went to state last year and afterward, at a school assembly, Andy Smithson was introduced and everyone clapped and cheered for him. Including Lisa.

This year, Bart was determined that he would go to state. Not only would he go, he would win

first place in the cross-country. He would be number one. Bart Collins, the winner. The best runner in the state. That would make Lisa stand up and cheer.

Bart figured running was his only chance to be the best at anything. He sure wasn't going to win any prize for his grades. He wasn't good at fixing things and he couldn't sing or act. But he could run. Fast. And the more he worked at it, the faster he got.

Gordon and Dan, his best buddies, thought he was crazy to get up so early every day.

"You're knocking yourself out for nothing," Gordon said. "Even if you get first place at state, what difference will it make? You think you'll get a good job and lots of money because you can run fast?"

"Some runners make money at it," Bart said. "They go to races all over the country."

"Like where?" Gordon said.

"Like Spokane. The Bloomsday race is the biggest timed race in the world. As soon as I get a job, I'm going to save my money so I can go there next May."

"If you wait till you get a job, you'll be too old to run," Gordon said. "Who's going to hire you? You're nuts even to keep applying."

Bart ignored him. "Someday I'm going to run the Boston Marathon, too," he said.

"Sure. And someday you'll win a gold medal and have lunch in the White House," Gordon said.

Bart didn't say any more. But he knew he was going to run in the Bloomsday race next year.

On that Friday morning, Bart's shoes splashed on the wet pavement as he pounded down the sidewalk. He glanced across the street toward Lisa's house. There were no lights on but there was a white van in the driveway. Two men carried something out of the house and loaded it into the van. It looked like a TV set.

Was Lisa moving? Bart felt sick. For weeks, he had been working up his nerve to ask Lisa to go to a movie with him. What if she moved away before he did it?

Five o'clock in the morning seemed an odd hour to be moving. Why weren't there any lights on?

Bart slowed his pace and doubled back. The men loaded something else in the van. They moved quickly, without talking.

Was Lisa's house being robbed? Maybe Lisa and her mother were asleep while these men broke in and helped themselves.

Or maybe Lisa's family had money trouble. Bart knew about that firsthand. Maybe the rent was overdue and they didn't have the money. Maybe they were leaving in the dark so nobody would see them go.

If they were trying not to be noticed, he would look like a jerk if he started asking questions. Lisa would hate him for snooping into something that was none of his business.

But what if it was a burglary? Bart decided to get the license number of the van, just in case. He jogged back close enough to see it in the dim light. UEK 199. He repeated it to himself. UEK 199.

"Something wrong?" The low voice was behind him. Bart jumped. He had been looking so hard at the license number that he hadn't noticed one of the men walk toward him.

"No," Bart said, "nothing's wrong. I was looking for Lisa."

"She isn't here," the man said. "She moved."

The other man came around the side of the van. "That's right," he said, "she left last night with her parents."

The two men glared at Bart, as if daring him to ask any more questions.

"Thanks," Bart said. He didn't like the way those men looked at him, especially the tall one. He turned away and ran back down the street.

When Bart got home, his sister Maggie's kids were screaming. She was on the phone. Maggie was always on the phone. Bart wondered who she found to call at that time of the morning. She waved and pointed for him to quiet down the kids, as if it was his fault she ran off with Nat when she was 16 and had two babies, and then had to move back home when Nat walked out on her.

He ignored Maggie and got in the shower. He wondered if the men had told him the truth. Had Lisa moved? They said she left with her parents;

Bart thought she lived with only her mother.

After he got dressed, he wrote down the license number, just in case he needed it later. He planned to look for Lisa at school. If she was there, he could ask her about the van. If she wasn't there, he would know she had moved out, just like the men said.

Gordon and Dan were waiting for him at the corner, as usual, to walk to school.

"Let's skip today," Gordon said. "It's too nice to sit inside, listening to boring old Hobart give the morning report."

Mr. Hobart, the principal, made announcements every morning. Most of the students didn't listen.

"I can't skip again," Dan said. "If I do, Hobart will suspend me and my ma will kill me."

"There's booze at my place," Gordon said. "And nobody home. What about you, Bart? You want to have fun today?"

Bart hesitated. Gordon's plan sounded a whole lot better to him than school, but he wanted to see if Lisa was there or not.

"I'll come over this afternoon," Bart said, "as soon as school gets out."

"Me, too," Dan said.

Bart was late to his first-period class because he hung around Lisa's locker so long, waiting for her. Bart looked for her all day. He waited by her locker after school until the halls were empty. When she didn't come, Bart decided she really had

moved away. Probably he would never see her again.

He kicked the locker and stomped down the hall. All these months he'd dreamed about how Lisa would cheer for him after he won first place at state, and now she wouldn't even be there.

2

Gordon and Dan were already drunk when Bart got there. Empty beer cans littered the floor and the sweet smell of marijuana hung in the air.

"Joints, too?" Bart asked. "Where did you get joints?"

Gordon laughed. "Don't ask questions," he said.

"Where have you been?" Dan said. "School got out an hour ago." He handed Bart a bottle.

For a split second, Bart thought about his coach. "Stay away from drugs," Mr. Peters said. "They'll ruin your body. Same for alcohol; it's like pouring poison in your blood. If you want your body to be a first-class machine, you have to treat it right—and that means no drugs and no booze."

Bart pushed the memory out of his mind. What did Mr. Peters know, anyway?

With all the running Bart did, his body was a first-class machine, even if he did take a few drinks or smoke a little grass.

"Forget your problems," Gordon said. "Enjoy life."

Yes, Bart thought. Forget about Lisa. If she wanted to move away and not even say goodby

to him, let her do it. Forget about not having a job, even though he'd applied at Safeway and Taco Time and every place else he could think of. Everybody expected him to have experience. But how could he have any experience until *after* he got a job?

He took a long drink. He sat down, put his feet up and grinned at his buddies. He had another drink. And another.

Three hours and many drinks later, Gordon said, "I'm hungry. I need a pizza." His face was flushed and his speech sounded slurred.

Dan and Bart howled with laughter. Everything Gordon said was funny. Everything *any* of them said was funny.

"I'll go get a pizza," Bart said. He stood up, lost his balance, and bumped into a table. A lamp crashed to the floor.

Bart looked at the lamp. "Excuse me," he said.

Dan and Gordon doubled over laughing.

"Get extra cheese," Dan said.

"Do you want me to come with you?" Gordon asked.

"You can't come with me," Bart said, "because you're too slow. I'm going to *run.* I'll break all records for the fastest time to get a pizza."

Dan and Gordon clapped and whistled.

Bart lurched toward the front door. He fumbled with the doorknob. When he finally got the door open, he looked back at Gordon and Dan.

"Time me," he said. "I'm going to break the world's record."

Gordon yelled, "On your mark . . ."

Bart planted his feet in the starting position.

"Get set . . ."

Bart leaned forward.

"Go!"

Bart charged out the door. He ran down the sidewalk and across the grass. In his mind, he saw himself at state, easily winning first place in the cross-country race.

He imagined Lisa cheering for him.

Bart Collins, the fastest runner in the state. Bart Collins, the winner!

He ran to the corner and sprinted into the street.

He didn't stop to look.

He never saw the car that hit him.

3

Everything hurt. His head ached, his back hurt, his arms felt like someone had pounded him with a hammer. The only parts of him that didn't throb with pain were his legs.

Bart opened his eyes. One arm was bandaged; the other was badly bruised. He touched his face gingerly. It, too, was scraped and bruised. What had happened?

He realized he was in a hospital, but he hurt too much to care. He closed his eyes and went back to sleep.

The next time he woke up, a beautiful, young black nurse stood beside his bed.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," she said. "I thought you would never open your eyes."

Bart blinked at her. "What time is it?" he asked.

"It's eight o'clock Sunday morning."

"Sunday! What happened to Saturday?"

"You slept through it. A whole day gone while you snoozed. How do you feel?"

"Better."

"Good, because Dr. Dole will be here any minute."

"What happened to me?" Bart asked.

"You got hit by a car."

Bart remembered going to Gordon's house after school on Friday. He remembered laughing with Gordon and Dan. He remembered having a couple of drinks and a joint or two. But he sure didn't remember any car.

When Dr. Dole came in, he held Bart's hands and asked him to bend his fingers, one at a time. Bart did. The doctor told Bart to bend his elbow. Then the other elbow. Bart did.

"Now wiggle your toes," Dr. Dole said. Nothing happened.

"Wiggle your toes, please," he repeated.

"I'm trying to," Bart said. "They don't want to move."

Dr. Dole took what looked like a Popsicle stick out of his pocket and ran it across the bottom of Bart's foot. "Do you feel this?" he asked.

"No."

He ran the stick across the other foot. "How about this?"

"No." Bart's throat felt dry. "I don't feel anything."

Dr. Dole removed a safety pin from the lapel of his white jacket. He pricked Bart's ankle with the tip of the pin. "Do you feel that?" he asked.

"Feel what?"

Dr. Dole pricked him again, just below the knee. "Do you feel that?" he asked.

"I don't feel anything."

Dr. Dole used the pin on Bart's other leg, but Bart felt nothing. How could he not feel it when someone poked a pin into his leg?

"Try to bend your knees," Dr. Dole said.

Bart tried. He held his breath and strained but his knees lay there, flat against the sheet.

"Nothing happens," he said. "My legs won't move at all." A tight knot formed in the bottom of his stomach. Why couldn't he move his legs?

"Kandi," the doctor said, "help me get him balanced on the side of the bed."

The nurse put her hands on Bart's shoulders and helped him sit up while the doctor swung Bart's legs over the side of the bed. No matter how hard he tried, Bart was unable to kick either of his feet forward. They just dangled there, like the legs of a puppet with broken strings.

The doctor took a small rubber hammer and tapped Bart's knees. He frowned and wrote something on Bart's chart.

"What's the matter with my legs?" Bart asked. "Why won't they move? Why can't I feel anything?"

"When the car hit you," Dr. Dole explained, "it did some damage."

"What kind of damage?" Bart asked. He was almost afraid to ask, but he had to know the truth.

"To your spinal cord."

Bart felt dizzy. For a moment he was afraid he was going to faint and fall right off that bed. Only Kandi's arm around his shoulders steadied him.

"Don't panic," she said.

Don't panic! How could he *not* panic? His legs were hanging there like they didn't belong to him and the nurse said not to panic.

Dr. Dole helped Bart lie down again.

"I'm going to talk to your mother now," Dr. Dole said. "I'll be back to see you later this afternoon." He left before Bart could ask him any more questions.

Bart had been scared before. He was scared the night his parents had the big fight and his father left for good. He was scared when a gang of kids jumped him on his way home from first grade and stole his candy bar. He was scared when he got sent to Mr. Hobart's office for having a food fight with Gordon in the cafeteria. But none of those times compared with this.

This time he was scared with a capital 'S.' And there wasn't anything he could do about it.

4

Bart's mother stood beside his bed and cried.

The nurse, Kandi, came in. "Have you told him?" she asked.

"No."

"Told me what?" Bart tried again to move his legs. Nothing happened.

"I can't tell him," Mrs. Collins sobbed.

"You have to," Kandi said.

"Tell me what?" Bart demanded. "What is it? What's wrong with me?"

Kandi handed Bart's mother a tissue. Mrs. Collins wiped her eyes and took a deep breath. "Your legs are paralyzed," she said. "You won't be able to use them anymore."

Bart stared at his mother, his blue eyes wide with horror.

"The doctors suspected it right from the start. When you were brought to the emergency room, you never moved your legs. Dr. Dole told me then that you might be paralyzed. He didn't want to say for sure until you woke up and he tested you." She blew her nose. "Now he's sure. You won't be able to use your legs at all."

"For how long?" Bart asked.

His mother didn't answer. She was crying again, weeping silently into the soggy tissue.

Bart looked at Kandi. "How long will I be this way?" he asked again.

He knew the answer, even before he heard it. Deep down, he had suspected the truth ever since he first tried to wiggle his toes and couldn't.

"You will never use your legs again," Kandi said. "They will be like this for the rest of your life."

"Are you sure his back wasn't broken?" Mrs. Collins asked. "How can this happen if his back wasn't broken?"

"If there were fractured vertebrae," Kandi said, "he'd be in traction. Bart's paralysis was caused by internal hemorrhage. Blood went into his spinal cord, and the pressure of the blood killed the nerves in that part of the spine."

"Can't we do anything?" Bart asked. "Isn't there an operation to make me better?"

"There's no treatment now," Kandi said. "But new discoveries are made every day. There's always hope."

"Oh, Bart," Mrs. Collins moaned. "What will become of you?"

"Hush, woman," Kandi said. "His life isn't over. This boy will get along just fine."

Bart had never heard anyone tell his mother to hush before. To his surprise, his mother said nothing more.

"I won't ever walk again," Bart said. His breath came in short, fast gulps. He felt like someone had just punched him, hard, in the stomach.

"You'll use a wheelchair," Kandi said. She put one hand on Bart's shoulder. "I know it's tough," she said, "but you'll get through it." Then she turned and went out of the room.

Bart wanted to scream. How is it possible that scientists can send men to the moon but they don't know how to fix a spinal cord? He was only sixteen years old; how could his legs be paralyzed?

He wanted to throw something. Anything. He wanted to kick the walls, the way he had kicked Lisa's locker on Friday.

But Bart would never kick anything again.

He closed his eyes and wished his mother would leave. He wanted to be alone. He didn't want her to watch him cry. He lay still, hoping she would get the hint.

As if she could read his mind, Mrs. Collins said, "I'm going now. I'll be back later."

He watched his mother walk slowly out of the room. Her shoulders sagged. Her face was pale and she seemed much older than she was last week.

He knew this was hard for her, too, but he didn't want to talk to her. What would he talk about? Wheelchairs?

When Bart was finally alone, he put the pillow over his face and tried to muffle his sobs. He thought about all the miles he had run in the last

year, for nothing. Ten miles every morning. All those weeks and months of dragging himself out of bed while it was still dark out. And the hours he put in after school, lifting weights and doing pushups to get himself in top condition. All of that effort wiped out, because he had made one mistake. One stupid mistake.

His tears soaked into the pillowcase. He would never make it to state now. He would never win the cross-country. Lisa would never cheer for him.

And he would never run in Bloomsday. Never. He clenched his fists and pounded the hospital bed.

Bart Collins, the winner, the best runner in the state, would never again move his legs.

5

Bart sat in the wheelchair.

He wondered what his life would be like now. How would he finish school? What kind of work could he do? He had applied at Safeway to be a bag boy. But he couldn't be a bag boy now, even if they offered him a job.

He pushed himself to the window and looked out. He thought about all the things he would never be able to do. He couldn't play basketball. He couldn't dance.

Then the worst thought of all hit him. What about sex? He always acted cool when Gordon and Dan talked about sex, but the truth was, Bart had never even kissed a girl, much less made love to one. Now he was sure he never would. What girl would want to go to bed with a guy who couldn't even walk?

"That is the saddest face I've seen all morning," Kandi said as she came into Bart's room. "What are you thinking about that makes you scowl so?"

"Sex."

Kandi threw back her head and laughed. "Most folks smile when they think about sex," she said.

"Not me," Bart said. "I'm thinking how I'll never be able to do it."

"Why not? It's your legs that are paralyzed, not your other vital parts."

"What girl would want me now?" Bart asked.

"Lots of girls will."

"Oh, sure," Bart said. "The girl of my dreams will kiss me and say, 'I just adore men in wheelchairs. I've always wanted to marry a useless cripple.' "

Kandi's smile faded. "You are not a useless cripple," she said. "And if she's really the girl of your dreams, she won't care about the wheelchair. She'll love you just the way you are."

"Fat chance." Usually, Bart was glad to see Kandi because she always took time to talk to him. She told him about her husband and about the other patients and about what she'd had for lunch. This time, he wished she would go away.

"Do you have a girlfriend?" Kandi asked. "Someone special?"

Bart thought about Lisa. "I did. I don't anymore."

"Why not? What happened?"

"What happened? Are you crazy? What happened is that my legs don't work anymore. That's what happened." He didn't add that Lisa had moved and didn't know anything about the accident.

"Seems to me it's time for you to quit feeling sorry for yourself."

"That's easy for you to say," Bart said. "There's nothing wrong with your legs."

Kandi put her hands on her hips and glared at him.

"OK," she said. "Your legs are paralyzed. It was a tough break and you have a right to feel bad about that. But you act like your life is over."

"It might as well be."

"You still have your arms, with good, strong muscles. You still have your brain. Be glad you're alive!"

"Why don't you leave me alone?" Bart said. "What do you know, anyway? You have a good job and a husband. You never lost the use of your legs."

"No," she said quietly. "I never lost the use of my legs. But I lost my baby. My little Johnny."

Bart looked at her. There were tears in her eyes.

"My little boy," Kandi said, "died when he was two years old."

"What happened to him?"

"He had bone cancer."

"I'm sorry," Bart said, and he meant it, too. Kandi was a nice woman, even if she did lecture him. He was sorry her baby died.

"When we buried Johnny, I thought my life was over. I wished I could die and go in that grave with him."

Bart didn't say anything. He didn't know what to say.

"For six months, I sat in my house and cried. Then one day my Mama sat me down and she said she missed Johnny, too, but tears wouldn't bring him back. She told me to decide how I was going to spend the rest of my life. I could waste it feeling sorry for myself or I could make the most of what I had left. That's when I decided to be a nurse."

"You weren't always a nurse?"

"Before I had Johnny, I was a waitress. After he died, I wanted to help other sick kids. So I worked nights to pay for nursing school and, eight years later, here I am."

"Here you are," Bart said, "picking on a poor sick kid who can't even walk away from you." He smiled at her and Kandi smiled back.

"You're hopeless," she said.

"Maybe you'll have another baby," Bart said.

"I hope so. We've been trying for a long time and it hasn't happened yet." She winked at him. "Trying is fun, though," she said.

After Kandi left, Bart wondered how he could make the most of what he had left. He couldn't think of a single way. He decided it's easier to change your life when you can walk.

Much easier.

6

"You're famous!" Kandi said.

She waved Monday's newspaper at Bart. "Most folks never get their name in the newspaper unless they die."

The story was in the second section.

Boy Paralyzed After Accident.

The article said the driver of the car was Fred Whitney, owner of Whitney Construction Company.

"Maybe I should sue him," Bart said. "If he owns a business, he must have a lot of money."

Kandi's eyes flashed angrily. "What's the matter with you, boy?" she asked. "Why would you sue that man when you're the one who ran into the street without looking?"

"His car hit me," Bart said. "Pedestrians have the right of way."

"He's the one who ought to sue you," Kandi said. "It wasn't his fault at all. Read the story. Two witnesses saw you run into the street, right in front of him. Drunk, yet."

Bart winced when he thought back to Friday. Since no one had mentioned it, he assumed no one knew he had been drinking.

"You don't have to get huffy," Bart said. "I was only kidding about suing him."

"You've put a terrible burden on that man," she said. "He was crying after the accident."

"How do you know?"

"He followed the ambulance when they brought you in. He's called the nurses' station every day to ask about you."

Bart looked at his name in print. He wondered if any of his friends would see the article. Did Dan and Gordon know about his accident? Or did they think he was sick or just cutting class?

He wondered if Lisa knew. If she moved out of town, she wouldn't see this newspaper. She might never know what had happened to him. Maybe that was just as well. Despite what Kandi said about the girl of his dreams, he was sure he and Lisa had no future together now.

When Kandi left, he read the article again. He had dreamed about getting his name in the paper. He always thought it would happen on the sports page, when he won first place at state.

"Hey, Bart, how's it going?"

"Quiet, you nerd. Maybe he's asleep." Gordon and Dan had come to see him.

"What are you guys doing here?" Bart said.

"We came to see the pretty nurses," Gordon said.

"How are you feeling?" Dan asked.

"OK. They kept me doped up until today."

"That's getting high the hard way," Gordon said.

"We thought you'd decided to keep the pizza for yourself. We didn't know about the accident. We're, uh, sorry. . . ." Dan looked down at the floor. "We're sorry about your legs."

Bart nodded. "How did you guys find out about me?" he asked.

"It was on the morning report. Mr. Hobart's started a fund to collect money for you."

"No kidding?"

"He opened a special bank account. People can put money in it to help pay your hospital bills."

"Why would Hobart do that? He hardly knows me."

Gordon shrugged.

"Did you hear about Lisa?" Gordon asked.

"What about her?" Bart said.

"We heard she ran away."

"Who said that? When?"

"We don't know," Dan said. "I looked for her after I heard about you on the morning report. I thought she might want to come with us to visit you. When I couldn't find her, I started asking around. She wasn't in school today. She wasn't there Friday, either."

"I heard she moved," Bart said.

"Somebody said Lisa's mother didn't know where she was," Dan said.

"Why would she run away?" Bart asked.

"Maybe she ran off with a guy," Gordon said.

"Shut up, you turkey," Dan said. "We're supposed to be cheering him up."

"OK, next time I'll bring some booze," Gordon said. "I'll pour it in a 7-Up can and sneak it in. We'll party right here in the hospital. That'll cheer him up. Right?" He punched Dan and did a little dance.

Dan didn't answer.

"Maybe those pretty nurses will join us," Gordon said. "Right, Danny boy?"

"I'm thinking about going straight," Dan said slowly. "No more booze. No drugs."

Gordon stopped dancing around. "What's the matter? You tired of having a good time?"

"No. I just. . . ." Dan glanced at Bart and looked away again. He wiped the palms of his hands on his jeans.

He's scared, Bart thought. He's afraid he might do something stupid, like run out in front of a car.

"You guys are my party buddies," Gordon said. "Why would you want to quit?"

"Because he doesn't want to end up like me," Bart said. The loudness of his voice startled him. He took a deep breath and spoke more softly. "If I hadn't been drunk. . . ."

"Hey! It was an accident," Gordon said. "Accidents can happen to anybody. It wasn't your fault."

"I think we should go now," Dan said. "The nurse said we could stay only five minutes." He grabbed Gordon's arm and started toward the door.

Bart didn't ask them to stay.

"Have a good one," Gordon said, as he waved at Bart from the doorway. "Take it easy."

Yes, Bart thought, I'll take it easy. What choice do I have?

For an instant, he hated Gordon. It wasn't fair! Gordon had had more to drink on Friday. It was his booze in the first place. Gordon did drugs sometimes, too. Not just grass; hard stuff. But nothing bad ever happened to him. He was still walking around, smarting off the same as ever. His legs were just fine. Nothing had changed for Gordon. Bart's whole life had come apart and all Gordon could think about was pouring booze into a 7-Up can.

7

In the middle of the night, he remembered.

The white van. The men carrying the TV set out of Lisa's house.

He saw them on Friday morning. According to Dan and Gordon, Lisa ran away on Friday. Was there a connection?

Maybe Gordon was right. Maybe Lisa did run off with a guy and she took the TV and some other things with her. Maybe the man who asked Bart if something was wrong that morning was really Lisa's boyfriend.

But it didn't quite add up. If she ran off with some guy, who was the second man? There were two men loading the van.

The man who spoke to Bart said Lisa had moved. If that was true, her mother would know it.

Bart wished he could talk to Lisa's mother, and find out for himself what was going on. He had never met Mrs. Hanson. Should he call her and talk to her on the phone? Or should he ask her to come to the hospital? He'd like to see her in person, but he sure couldn't go there.

He tried to remember exactly what Dan had told him. *Somebody said Lisa's mother didn't know where she was.*

Somebody said. Who was the somebody? Bart knew how stories got passed around school, whether they were true or not. Had someone actually talked to Mrs. Hanson or was 'somebody' guessing?

Friday morning seemed like ten years ago. His whole life had changed since Friday morning.

He lay still and thought about Lisa. Pretty Lisa, with her creamy skin and her soft blonde hair. He often talked to her during lunch period. After school, they stood by her locker and talked some more. She always laughed at his jokes. Sometimes she walked to the gym with him and watched while he used the bench press. When she smiled at him, he felt like the most important person on earth.

Lisa wouldn't run off with another guy. She liked Bart. Even though they had never actually dated, Lisa liked him. He was sure of it.

Besides, Lisa was too smart to run off like that and not finish school. They had talked about it after Maggie and the kids moved back home.

"That won't happen to me," Lisa had said. "I'm getting my diploma so I can get a decent job. And I'm not getting married right out of school, either."

"You do want to get married some day though, don't you?"

"Not until I'm 21," Lisa replied. "If anybody wants to marry me before that, they're out of luck."

"I think you would be worth waiting for," Bart said. He had smiled at Lisa, and he knew by the way she smiled back that she was thinking the same thing he was.

No, he thought again, Lisa would not run off with anyone.

Bart could hear the nurses talking in the hall. He looked at the clock. 3 a.m. He couldn't call Mrs. Hanson at 3 a.m., but he decided to call her the next day and tell her about the van. If she told him the van belonged to Lisa's boyfriend, then at least he would know the truth.

As soon as Kandi came on duty the next morning, Bart told her he had to make a phone call. There wasn't a phone in his room but Kandi helped him into the wheelchair and told him he could use the telephone at the nurses' station. Mrs. Hanson answered on the first ring.

Bart asked to speak to Lisa.

"She isn't here," Mrs. Hanson said. "Who's calling?"

"This is Bart Collins," Bart said. "I'm a friend of Lisa's from school."

"She told me about you, Bart. Don't you know? Haven't you seen the news on television? Lisa was kidnapped."

"Kidnapped!" Bart gasped. "When? I heard she ran away."

"No. The police said that, too, at first, but I know my daughter, and she would not run away."

"That's what I think," Bart said.

"I was out of town," Mrs. Hanson explained. "My sister was sick, and I went to help. When I got home Sunday night, my house had been robbed and Lisa was gone. I called the police right away and they're looking for her, but so far they have no leads." Mrs. Hanson started to cry. "I shouldn't have left her alone like that. Maybe if I had been home, this wouldn't have happened."

Bart felt cold. Lisa's house had been robbed. And now Lisa was missing.

"I went past your house early Friday morning," he said. "There was a white van in the driveway and two men were putting things in it."

Mrs. Hanson was silent.

"When I heard Lisa was gone," Bart said, "I thought maybe I should tell you about the van."

"Where are you?" Mrs. Hanson asked. "We need to tell this to the police."

"Highland Hospital. I was in an accident."

"I'll be right there."

8

Minutes later, a police officer arrived.

Kandi led him into Bart's room.

"This is Sgt. Wills," she said. "He would like to ask you some questions."

Bart could tell Kandi was curious as a cat. She probably thought he was in big trouble.

"Good morning, son," Sgt. Wills said. "Mrs. Hanson called us. She'll be here soon, too." He smiled at Bart. "If you feel well enough, I'd like you to tell me what you told her on the telephone."

Bart repeated the story about the van.

Sgt. Wills asked him questions. "What kind of van was it? How old? What did the man you talked to look like?"

Mrs. Hanson arrived. Even if Bart wasn't expecting her, he would have known who she was. She looked exactly like Lisa, only older and heavier.

"This is the first clue we've had," she told Bart. "I got home Sunday night and the house was a mess. Drawers emptied, cupboards open, and everything of value gone."

"Including Lisa," Bart said.

"Especially Lisa."

"We're assuming the robbers thought nobody was home," Sgt. Wills said. "Probably Lisa woke up, came downstairs, and surprised them."

"So you think they took her with them?" Bart asked.

"Yes."

Bart could feel drops of sweat on his upper lip. He didn't even want to think about what the two men might have done to Lisa.

"I hoped the reward would make them want to free Lisa," Mrs. Hanson said.

"Reward?" Bart asked.

"My bosses have offered a $2,000 reward to anyone who brings Lisa home unharmed."

"Didn't you think it was odd that those men were carrying things out in the dark?" Sgt. Wills asked. "Didn't you wonder what was going on?"

"Sure, I thought it was odd. That's why I went back and got the license number."

Sgt. Wills jumped to his feet. "You got the number?" he said. "Can you still remember it?"

"No," Bart said. Sgt. Wills sat down again. "But I wrote it down that morning when I got home."

"Call home," Sgt. Wills said. "Get the number."

Bart wheeled out of his room and down to the nurses' station. Kandi was waiting for him in the hall. She handed him the telephone.

Maggie answered and Bart could hear her kids fighting in the background.

"I need you to get a piece of paper out of my room," Bart said. "It's on my dresser and there's a license number written on the top."

"What do you need it for?"

"I need it because there's a cop standing here waiting for me to give it to him. Now hurry."

While he waited, Kandi whispered, "I know I told you to make something of your life but I didn't expect you to open a private detective service while you were still in the hospital."

Normally, Bart would have laughed, but right then he was too worried about Lisa to think anything was funny.

Finally Maggie came back to the phone. "I can't find it," she said.

"It has to be there. There's a stack of papers on my dresser and that one would be right on top."

"Not anymore," Maggie said. "I hope it wasn't too important. The boys went into your room and used that paper to color pictures."

Bart clenched his fist. "Then get the pictures," he said. "Maybe you can still read the number."

"I don't have the pictures," Maggie said. "The kids colored on Saturday, and on Monday I cleaned. I threw all those papers in the trash."

Bart tried to stay calm. "Listen, Maggie," he said. "This is important. A friend of mine is missing and the cops think that license number might belong to the kidnappers."

"Is it the girl I saw on TV?" Maggie asked. "Lisa somebody?"

"That's her."

"I thought you were still in the hospital," Maggie said. "How did you get mixed up in a kidnapping?"

"Please, Maggie. Don't waste time with questions. Just go out to the garbage can and look through all the trash until you find the paper with the numbers on it."

"I can't," Maggie said.

"Yes, you can. Get Mom and the boys to help you. Do it now!"

"I can't," Maggie said. "Today's Tuesday. The garbage truck already came and emptied our can."

Bart hung up the phone. He didn't even say goodby.

9

"Think hard," Sgt. Wills said. "Try to remember."

"I *am* trying," Bart said. He had strained his memory for the last half hour, ever since he talked to Maggie. "A lot has happened to me since then."

"We understand," Mrs. Hanson said. She stood up. "I think we should leave Bart alone for awhile. Maybe he could concentrate better if we weren't watching him."

Bart gave Mrs. Hanson a grateful look. Lisa had a nice, understanding mother.

Sgt. Wills followed Mrs. Hanson out of the room. Kandi immediately rushed in.

"When I have to remember something," Kandi said, "I pretend I'm back in that place, doing exactly what I did at the time. Go through it step by step. Every detail."

"Thanks. I'll try that."

"I hope it works," she said. "They're hanging around out in the hall." She closed the door when she left.

Bart took a deep breath. He shut his eyes and pictured himself running toward Lisa's house. He

felt the pavement under his shoes and the rain in his face. The scene was so vivid that for a few moments he forgot about his legs. He felt like he was really running again, training for state.

In his mind, he saw the van, and doubled back, and looked at the license number.

UEK 199.

The numbers popped into his mind, clear as could be. UEK 199.

"I've got it!" he yelled.

The door flew open and Sgt. Wills rushed in, followed by Mrs. Hanson and Kandi.

"UEK 199," Bart said.

"You're sure?" Sgt. Wills asked.

"Positive."

"Good job! I'll call it in," Sgt. Wills said, and he hurried out of the room.

When he returned, he said, "Son, you've been a big help. Please call me if you think of anything else."

"I will."

"It would be best not to tell anyone you talked to me," Sgt. Wills said. "Don't say anything about the van, or the license number."

"Will you let me know what happens?"

"If he doesn't, I will," Mrs. Hanson said. "I can't thank you enough. No wonder Lisa said you're the cutest boy in school."

"Lisa said that?"

Mrs. Hanson nodded. "I'll leave now, too," she said. "I want to stay near my telephone."

After they left, Kandi helped Bart get back into bed.

"I can't explain what this was all about," he said. "The cop told me not to tell anyone."

"You don't need to explain," Kandi said. "I listened outside your room." Before Bart could say anything, she added, "I was afraid you were in trouble. I thought maybe I could help."

"If only I'd called the police Friday morning," Bart said. "I might have prevented this whole thing."

"You had no way of knowing," Kandi said. "The important thing is that you did call them now."

"But what's happened to Lisa in the meantime? It's been four days. She might be dead. Maybe they killed her so she couldn't identify them."

"If they had killed her, the police would have found her body."

"Maybe they took her out in the woods, tied her with rope, and shot her."

"Look," Kandi said. "You'll drive yourself crazy thinking of all the bad things that could have happened. Why not think of the good ones instead? You have just as much chance of being right."

"I can't think of any good ones," Bart said.

"Then I'll help you. Maybe they took her with them. Maybe they decided to leave town today and they stopped for gas and she jumped out of the car and escaped. Maybe she's calling her mother right now."

"Fat chance."

"It's just as logical as thinking they took her into the woods and shot her."

"I hope you're right," Bart said, "but I'm scared for her."

"Me, too," Kandi admitted. "I saw her picture on TV this morning. I didn't know she was your girlfriend."

"Who said she was my girlfriend?"

"Why else would you be running past her house at five in the morning?"

Bart's mother rushed in, out of breath. "Maggie says you've been arrested," she said. She looked around. "Where are the police? Maggie said the police were here."

Bart hesitated. Sgt. Wills had told him not to tell anyone about the van. Did that include his mother?

"It was a mistake," Kandi said.

"Maggie said something about a license number. She said maybe you stole a car."

Kandi took Mrs. Collins firmly by the arm and led her to the door. "Bart needs to rest," she said. "I assure you he did not steal a car and there is no trouble with the police."

"Oh, thank heaven!" Mrs. Collins exclaimed. "Maggie had me all worked up. I ought to turn that girl over my knee."

Bart thought that was the best idea he'd heard all day.

10

Gordon and Dan burst in, full of news.

"Lisa didn't run off with a guy," Dan said. "She was kidnapped," Gordon said. "It was on TV this morning."

"Hobart put it in the morning report."

"They don't know how long she's been missing."

They both talked at once and so fast that if Bart had not already known about Lisa, he would never have made any sense out of what they told him.

When they finally slowed down, Dan said, "You don't act very surprised."

"I already heard about it," Bart said.

Gordon looked around the room. "There's no TV in here," he said. "Who told you?"

"My mother was here."

"We heard there might be a search party," Gordon said. "If there is, we're going to volunteer. I know how they do it. Everyone walks through an area, just a few feet apart, looking for clues."

Bart wished he could join the search party. At least then he'd feel like he was doing something to help Lisa.

"Once I heard about a guy who was in a search party," Gordon said, "and he found the body. All the cops had missed it and this guy with no training goes out in the field and he finds the body."

"Shut up, Gordon," Bart said.

"What's the matter with you?" Gordon asked.

"You nerd," Dan said. "Bart doesn't want you or anybody else to find Lisa's body."

"I didn't mean that," Gordon said. "I just meant. . . ."

"Everyone at school has asked about you," Dan said, turning to Bart. "They want to know how soon you'll be back."

"I don't know," Bart said. "Maybe in a couple of weeks."

"Mr. Peters organized a car wash. It's next Saturday and the money goes to your hospital fund. All the guys on the track team signed up to help."

Bart thought about his coach. It was Mr. Peters who first gave Bart the idea of running every day, of training on his own. Mr. Peters had told Bart that he could be the best runner in the state if he worked at it, and Bart had believed him.

I would have made it, too, Bart thought. I could have done it.

"We have to go," Gordon said. "I don't want to miss out if they decide to start searching in the woods. They might even drag the lake."

He sounded excited, like it was a great adventure.

Didn't he realize it was *Lisa* he was talking about? Pretty, blonde Lisa, who always made Bart feel important?

"I'll check in with you tomorrow," Dan said, "and let you know what's happening."

"Why don't you get a TV in here?" Gordon asked. "If we're the ones who find her, we might be on the news and you wouldn't want to miss it."

"This is a hospital, not a motel," Bart said.

"What are you mad about?" Gordon said.

"Can't you see he's worried about Lisa?" Dan asked. "How would you like it if your girlfriend were missing?"

"If my girlfriend were missing," Gordon said, "I'd be out looking for her."

"Bart would be, too, if he could," Dan said.

"Is that why he's so touchy? He's jealous because he's stuck in the hospital and we're the ones who are going to be the heroes."

That did it. Bart knew he wasn't supposed to say anything about the van, but Gordon was so smug, Bart couldn't stand it.

"Maybe not," Bart said. "Maybe I'm the one who'll be the hero."

"What do you mean?" Dan said.

"How are you going to rescue anybody when you can't even walk?" Gordon said.

"It just so happens, wise guy," Bart said, "that I saw a strange van parked at Lisa's house the morning she disappeared. I gave the license number to the cops."

"No kidding?" Dan said. "When did you talk to the cops?"

"About two hours ago. You guys can't tell anyone, though."

"Why not?" Gordon asked.

"Because the cop I talked to said I shouldn't say anything about it. Promise you'll keep quiet about it."

"I promise," Dan said.

"I don't see what difference it makes," Gordon said.

"When they trace the owner of the van," Dan said, "they might catch the guys that robbed Lisa's house."

"They might find Lisa, too," Bart said.

"I wonder if she'll be dead or alive," Gordon said.

"You scum," Bart said.

"Come on, sleaze ball," Dan said. "Let's get out of here before Bart punches you out."

"Me?" Gordon asked. "What did I do?"

Bart could hear them arguing all the way to the elevator.

11

Lisa waited four days.

Four days from the morning she woke up and heard strange noises downstairs. Four days since she went to see who was there.

As soon as she'd seen the men she knew she'd made a terrible mistake. She should have telephoned for help or hidden in a closet until the noises stopped.

She walked into the living room just as the men dropped her mother's tape player into a pillowcase.

She tried to turn around and go back upstairs before they saw her but she wasn't fast enough.

"Hold it," the tall man said.

Lisa paused on the stairway, her heart thumping loudly. She looked back at the two men.

"Now what will we do?" the short one asked. "You said nobody was home."

"We'll take her with us."

"Are you crazy? Hot goods are one thing. Kidnapping is different. I don't want any part of that rap."

"Do you have a better idea?"

"Well, I. . . ."

"I didn't think so. If we leave her here, she'll have the cops on our tail before we get out of the driveway."

"I won't call the cops," Lisa said. "I swear I won't. If you leave me here, I won't tell anyone."

"You won't tell because you're coming with us. Get in the van."

Lisa tried to stall. "Can't I get dressed first?" she said. "It will look suspicious if I'm riding around in my bathrobe."

The tall man hesitated. "All right," he said. "But hurry it up and don't try anything funny."

Lisa went to her bedroom. While she pulled on her jeans, she tried to think how she could get help. She had time to write a note but her mother wouldn't be home to find the note until Sunday night. Anything could happen by then.

She went slowly out of her room and down the hallway toward her mother's room. If the men asked her what she was doing, she planned to say she was getting a sweater. Instead, she would dial 911 and ask for help.

If she called while the men were outside, they wouldn't hear her. She listened carefully. She thought she heard voices in the driveway. For a moment, one voice sounded like Bart Collins and Lisa almost yelled, "Help! Bart! Get help!" Bart was strong; he would be able to help her.

But she couldn't see the driveway, and she couldn't imagine why Bart would be at her house at five in the morning, so she didn't yell.

Instead, she tiptoed to her mother's bedroom and picked up the phone. It was hard to see the numbers in the dark, but she didn't dare turn on a light. She held the receiver close to her face. She punched 9. She hit 1. Before she could punch it the second time, a fist struck her hand. The telephone clattered to the floor.

"I told you not to try anything funny." The tall man grabbed Lisa's wrist and pushed her in front of him, down the stairs and out to his van.

They made her ride in the back. There were no windows, so she didn't know which way they drove. She sat on the floor, next to three television sets.

The van stopped once and the men unloaded the television sets, including the one they stole from Lisa's house. Lisa inched forward and peeked out the window by the passenger's seat but she saw no other people.

They drove another hour or so before they stopped.

"You can get out now," the tall man said.

Lisa looked around. They were parked in front of a mobile home. She saw nothing but trees. There were no other homes, nor any sign of people.

They went inside.

"Can you cook?" the short man asked.

"Some," Lisa said.

"Then cook us some breakfast."

She went into the kitchen. There were eggs in the refrigerator. She saw a loaf of bread and some cans of applesauce and coffee. She fixed toast and scrambled eggs. She warmed the applesauce and put it in little bowls. The two men acted like it was a feast.

All she had done since then was cook meals and wait for something to happen. Four endless days. To Lisa, it seemed more like four months.

She knew their names now. The tall one was Steve and the short one was Fuzzy. Although the mobile home belonged to Fuzzy, Steve gave all the orders.

Every night, they went out for a while but they always locked her in the small bedroom before they left, and no matter how hard she tried, Lisa was unable to open the door.

The only window in the room was boarded shut. Should she try to run away during the day? She had no idea which way to go. It would be hard to run in the woods, with its thick underbrush. If she ran away and they caught her, she didn't know what they would do.

Once she heard them arguing about what to do with her.

"Let's drive her someplace and dump her," Fuzzy said.

"So she can run to the cops and lead them here?"

"She wouldn't find my place again. My own brother can't find it."

"Maybe not. But the girl can describe us. She could look at mug shots and pick us out."

"I don't want to get caught with her here."

"We won't get caught. Only two more jobs and I'll take off for Mexico. You can go back to being Joe Citizen."

"What happens to the girl? You can't leave her here."

"Quit worrying. I'll take care of her when the time comes."

Lisa wondered when that would be. And exactly how did he plan to 'take care of her'?

She was sure the police were looking for her by now. She hoped some clue might lead them to this hideaway. So she waited. And waited.

And waited.

On the fourth day, she decided she couldn't wait forever. It was time to make a move.

12

Mr. Peters walked into Bart's hospital room, strode toward the bed, and put out his hand. Bart was so surprised to see his track coach he almost didn't respond.

Mr. Peters' handshake was firm. "I brought you something," he said. He handed Bart a slim, pink-and-blue pamphlet with a picture on the front. Bart read what it said on the cover

Lilac BLOOMSDAY Run.
The World's Largest Timed Road Race.
12 Kilometers (7.46 miles)

The cover photograph showed six young men running. They had Bloomsday numbers on their shirts.

Bart opened the pamphlet and looked at the rest of the pictures. One showed the crowd of runners at the start of the race. There were closeups of the spectators and an aerial view of some of the runners crossing a bridge. There was registration information and a map of the course. The pamphlet told about the awards and gave a chart to use to estimate running time.

For a moment, as Bart looked at the Bloomsday brochure, he forgot about the accident. The old dreams came back and he felt a surge of excitement as he thought of actually running in Bloomsday.

Then he saw a photo of a girl in a wheelchair, and he remembered. His hand started to shake and he laid the pamphlet on his bed. He looked at Mr. Peters. Was this some kind of joke? If it was, Bart didn't think it was funny.

Maybe Mr. Peters was angry because Bart had broken the training rules by drinking. Maybe this was his way of getting even.

But Mr. Peters didn't look angry. He smiled at Bart. "You always talked about competing in Bloomsday," Mr. Peters said. "You probably won't be ready for this year's race, but if you start training soon, you ought to be able to go next year."

Bart stared at him. Mr. Peters didn't look like he was joking. "Don't you know about my legs?" Bart asked. "I'm paralyzed."

"Oh, I realize you won't be able to *run* Bloomsday, the way we first planned," Mr. Peters said. "You would compete in the wheelchair category."

He took the pamphlet from Bart's lap, turned some pages, and read out loud. "Wheelchair athletes will compete for prize money in the Invacare Cup series." He looked at Bart. "You are the best runner I ever coached," he said. "I think you could still be a fine athlete, if you want to try."

Bart didn't answer. He was afraid if he tried to talk, he would cry, and he didn't want to cry in front of Mr. Peters.

Mr. Peters put a hand on Bart's shoulder. "I've never had the opportunity to coach a wheelchair athlete before," he said, "so I can't guarantee anything. I'll give it my best shot, though. What do you say? When they let you out of this hospital, do you want to train with me again?"

"I don't know," Bart said. He wanted to run in Bloomsday, not race in a wheelchair.

"I'll start learning about wheelchair competition," Mr. Peters said. "I understand there's a National Wheelchair Athletic Association. Maybe someday we can get you one of those special racing chairs." He pointed to a picture on the last page of the brochure. It showed a man in a strange-looking wheelchair. The man was laughing and flexing his arm muscles.

After Mr. Peters left, Bart looked at the Bloomsday pamphlet again and again. He wondered how fast he could have run the 7.46 miles if he had continued training. Would he ever have finished in less than 40 minutes? He thought so but he would never know for sure.

He wondered how he could learn about those racing wheelchairs. Were they expensive?

Who would drive him to Spokane? Where would he stay? How would he ever earn money for entry fees and other expenses? He couldn't do it before when he could walk. Now it would be impossible.

The questions and doubts crowded into his mind. Just because he used to run fast didn't mean he'd be able to go fast in a wheelchair. Could someone in a wheelchair really be an athlete? Mr. Peters said so, but maybe he was only trying to be nice. Probably Mr. Peters felt sorry for him.

Bart decided it was foolish to think he could make it to Bloomsday now. Even if he wanted to try, he could never afford it. There was no use even thinking about it. He leaned over the side of his bed and dropped the Bloomsday brochure into the wastebasket.

13

Lisa decided to run for it.

The men didn't watch her closely anymore. Since she had caused them no trouble, they paid little attention to her unless they wanted her to cook for them.

On Tuesday afternoon, her fifth day as a captive, she made up her mind that when it was time to fix dinner, she would make her move. She had waited long enough to be rescued. If the police knew how to find her, they would have done so. She couldn't wait any longer. It was driving her crazy to do nothing all day and be locked in every night.

Also, she didn't trust Steve. Steve had a mean streak, especially when he was drinking. Once he had lost his temper and slapped Fuzzy. Another time, Lisa saw him throw a can of beer through a window, just because the beer wasn't cold.

She didn't think Fuzzy would hurt her. He would probably just drive her far away and turn her loose, but Lisa suspected Steve could get violent. She didn't want to find out if she was right.

She planned to go into the kitchen as usual and put some bacon in a frying pan. She would turn

the burner on low, so the bacon wouldn't burn. Steve and Fuzzy would smell the bacon and think she was cooking it for them. Instead, Lisa would sneak out the kitchen door and run away. By the time the men realized the bacon was burning, Lisa would be long gone.

Too bad she didn't know how to drive. Fuzzy's van was parked outside. Steve's old brown car was, too. The keys might even be in one of them. But Lisa had never tried to drive. It would be safer and faster to escape on foot.

At six o'clock, Steve said, "I'm hungry. Go fix us some food."

Lisa went to the kitchen, turned on the gas burner, and put a fry pan on it. She laid four strips of bacon in the pan and waited until they began to sizzle. Then she turned the burner down to low and tiptoed toward the door.

She opened the door slowly and carefully, listening for Steve and Fuzzy. She heard nothing. Lisa stepped outside. She waited only a second. Then she crouched behind some low bushes and moved toward the road. When she reached the road, she looked back toward the house. She saw nothing. She heard nothing.

She ran as fast as she could. The road was not paved, and twice she almost fell. She looked back over her shoulder but saw no one.

She rounded a bend and kept going. Behind her, she suddenly heard voices shouting. Steve and Fuzzy must have discovered she was gone.

She heard an engine start and then the van roaring down the road. She knew she could never outrun the van. If she stayed on the road, they would catch her instantly. She turned to the right and struggled through the underbrush.

She tried not to make any noise but it was impossible not to. Branches snapped as she pushed her way through, and leaves and twigs crackled under her feet.

The van slowed and Lisa dropped to the ground, hoping she could not be seen from the road.

"There she is!" Steve shouted.

Lisa scrambled to her feet and started to run again. She heard the men behind her. The underbrush tore her shirt and a tree branch made a nasty scratch on her cheek. She wiped the blood with the back of her hand and kept going.

She heard feet crashing through the woods behind her. She would never make it. The men were bigger and stronger; there was no way she could outrun them. She might as well give up.

Lisa stopped running and turned around. As she did, a shrill sound pierced the air. Steve and Fuzzy froze.

Through the trees, Lisa could see a whirling blue light, the kind that's on the top of a police car. The men saw it, too, and started running again. This time they didn't run toward Lisa. Fuzzy sprinted off to the right, and Steve went the other way.

"This way," Lisa yelled. "Over here."

Moments later, Sgt. Wills burst into view and

ordered Fuzzy to stop. Sgt. Wills held a gun.

Fuzzy put his hands in the air and said, "Don't shoot. I'll go with you."

"The other man went that way," Lisa said, as she pointed in the direction Steve had run.

A second officer ran after Steve while Sgt. Wills frisked Fuzzy to be sure he didn't have a weapon.

"Are you OK?" he asked Lisa.

"I'm OK," she said. "I'm glad you got here when you did."

They returned to the police car. Sgt. Wills called for more officers to come and help search for Steve.

Lisa sat in the back seat and shook. Now that she was finally safe, she couldn't stop shaking.

Within an hour, two police dogs had covered the area. One of them caught a scent but lost it again at the edge of a small stream.

A helicopter hovered overhead as police officers continued to search the woods. They found nothing.

Steve was gone.

14

Bart saw Lisa on TV.

As he wheeled into the hospital's lounge area, he heard an announcer say, "We interrupt this program to bring you a special news bulletin." When Bart looked at the screen, he saw a picture of Lisa.

The reporter told of Lisa's rescue and about the search for the man who had escaped. The man was described as white, six feet tall, and wearing a red T-shirt, jeans, and cowboy boots.

Then the reporter talked with Sgt. Wills. "How did you know where to find her?" the reporter asked.

"Someone saw the white van in her driveway last Friday and told us. We traced the owner. When we found that the same person owned a mobile home and property outside of town, we got a search warrant and went out there. We found the van in the middle of a county road, with the doors open and the engine running."

Bart felt goosebumps on his arms. His information had led the police to Lisa. Even though he never left the hospital, Bart knew that he had res-

cued Lisa. He wondered if Sgt. Wills would tell Lisa who had taken the van's license number. He hoped so.

When Bart got back to his room, a man was there. "Are you Bart Collins?" the man asked.

"Yes."

"I'm Fred Whitney."

Bart shook the man's hand. Why did that name seem familiar?

"I was driving the car," Mr. Whitney said. "The car that hit you."

Bart didn't know what to say.

"I just want to tell you how sorry I am," Mr. Whitney said.

"It wasn't your fault."

"I know that. But I can't help wishing I'd gone a different way or left a few minutes later that day. It's a terrible feeling to know I had a part in such an accident." He handed Bart a business card. "Please let me know how you get along," he said. "The hospital has talked with my insurance company. Your expenses will be paid. If I can do anything to help you, I'd be glad to."

"Thanks," Bart said. He put the card in his wallet.

Kandi hurried into Bart's room. "They found her!" she said. "I just heard it on the radio." She stopped when she saw Mr. Whitney. "Excuse me," she said. "I didn't know you had a visitor."

"I'm leaving," Mr. Whitney said. "Good luck, Bart."

"Goodby, Mr. Whitney."

Kandi frowned and put her hands on her hips. "You didn't call him, did you?" she asked. "With that nonsense about suing him?"

"I didn't call him. I didn't even know he was coming."

Two women looked in the door. One carried a notebook and the other had a camera bag on her shoulder. "We're from the *Evening News,*" one of the women said. "We heard that you're the one who tipped off the police in the Lisa Hanson case. We'd like to ask you a few questions."

Bart looked at Kandi. Had Sgt. Wills changed his mind about keeping it secret?

Kandi marched toward the door. "I'm sorry," she said. "You must have the wrong room. This patient has been here since Friday night and is not allowed to have any visitors." She gently pushed the two women out of the doorway and firmly closed Bart's door.

Five minutes later, Kandi was back. "Did you tell your friends about turning in the license number?" she asked.

"Yes—but they promised not to say anything."

"One of them broke his promise. Those women from the newspaper were with the search party that was looking for Lisa. When the news came in that she'd been found, thanks to an anonymous tip, one of the searchers yelled, 'I know who did it. I know who told the cops!' "

"Gordon," Bart said. "Gordon blabbed."

"He not only blabbed, he blabbed to the press," Kandi said. "Maybe you should call Sgt. Wills."

Bart cringed. He didn't want to admit to Sgt. Wills that he'd told Dan and Gordon, after Sgt. Wills had warned him not to.

Bart slammed his fists down on the arms of his wheelchair. He had felt so good about helping Lisa. Why did Gordon have to spoil it?

A few minutes later, Sgt. Wills called the nurses' station and asked to speak with Bart.

When Kandi told him who was calling, Bart didn't want to take the call. "He's going to yell at me. He's going to chew me out good."

"So next time don't tell the world your secrets."

All Sgt. Wills said was, "The word's out that you tipped us off."

"I know," Bart said. "Two people from the newspaper were here, but I wouldn't talk to them."

"You may as well tell them everything," Sgt. Wills said. "If you don't, they're going to hound me. They'll print the story anyway and call it an unconfirmed report. Admit you helped us and take the credit."

"I'm sorry they found out," Bart said.

"So am I, especially since one man got away. But it can't be helped now."

Just then the women from the newspaper returned, still nosing around for a story.

15

Someone was watching him. Bart knew it, even before he woke up. The nurses often came into his room at night to check on him, but this was different.

Bart tried to wake up.

He blinked sleepily as the white jacket came into focus. Bart was surprised to see a doctor in the middle of the night.

He didn't know this doctor. It wasn't Dr. Dole or the other doctor who sometimes checked him. The eyes looked familiar, though. Bart decided it must be one of the doctors from the emergency room, the night of the accident.

Besides the white jacket, this doctor wore a white cap, thin plastic gloves, and a surgical mask. He looked like he had just finished an operation.

"You need to get up," the doctor said. "We're going to do some tests on you."

"Now?" Bart looked at the clock. It was after midnight.

"Right now."

"Dr. Dole didn't tell me about any tests. Are you sure you have the right room?"

"You're Bart Collins, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"I have the right room."

"Is something wrong? Why do you. . . ."

"No more questions. We have to hurry."

When Dr. Dole had examined Bart that morning, he didn't hint that anything was wrong. All he did was remove the bandages from the cuts on Bart's arm. Yet this doctor made it seem that the tests were urgent.

Bart remembered that Kandi had taken his temperature just before she went home. Maybe he had a fever.

The doctor helped Bart into the wheelchair. He wasn't as good at it as Kandi was. Instead of putting his arms under Bart's armpits and lifting him, the way the nurses did, the doctor used his hands. His fingers dug into Bart's arms. He let go too soon and Bart landed with a jolt. "Let's go," the doctor said.

"What kind of tests are they?" Bart asked.

The doctor didn't answer. Whatever they were, they must be important if they had to be done at midnight.

The doctor went to the door and looked both ways. Then he pushed Bart's wheelchair quickly past the nurses' station and down the hall to the elevator. The nurse on duty was nowhere in sight.

They entered the elevator and the doors closed. As the doctor pushed the button, Bart noticed that he was wearing jeans. Dr. Dole and the other doc-

tor always wore white pants or slacks. Then Bart saw that this doctor had on cowboy boots. A warning flashed into Bart's mind. He remembered the news description of the man who had kidnapped Lisa: jeans, a red T-shirt, and cowboy boots.

He raised his eyes and looked closely at the white jacket. At the man's neck, where the jacket wasn't buttoned right, Bart saw a red T-shirt.

"I want to see your identification," Bart said. The man didn't answer.

"Before you do any tests," Bart continued, "I want one of the nurses to prove who you are."

"We aren't talking to any nurses."

"I'm going back to my room," Bart said. He tried to push the elevator button for the third floor.

Before he could reach it, the man's hand closed around his wrist. "You're coming with me," he said.

The elevator doors opened. Bart looked out at the hospital's parking garage. He knew now why this man's eyes looked familiar. This was the man Bart had talked to last Friday morning in Lisa's driveway. The man who robbed Lisa's house and took her captive.

"What do you want?" Bart asked.

"Revenge. I don't like stool pigeons."

Steve pushed Bart's chair out of the elevator into the parking garage. "You think you're a big hero, don't you?" he said. "Think you were smart to call the cops and tell them how to find me and Fuzzy."

He pulled off the hat and the surgical mask. "We'll see who's the smart one now."

Bart looked around. He didn't see any other people.

He knew the nurses would find his empty bed soon. They would look for him right away, but they wouldn't know where to look. They might think he was watching television in the lobby or wheeling up and down the halls. They never would look in the parking garage.

"Help!" Bart shouted. His voice echoed in the concrete garage.

Steve's hand clamped hard across Bart's mouth.

"No one can hear you," he said. "I figure I'll work out a trade. The cops can let Fuzzy go—and then I'll let you go. Maybe." Steve wheeled Bart to an old brown car and pushed the wheelchair up close. He opened the car door. He stood with his back to the inside of the car and reached for Bart, to lift him into the car.

Bart knew if he got in that car, he would never escape. He couldn't run away, like Lisa had done. Not in a wheelchair.

His only hope was for someone to see them here, in the garage. He had to do something fast, to attract attention and get help.

But what could he do?

Steve's hands gripped Bart's arms and he strained to lift Bart out of the chair. Bart held onto the arms of the chair. Steve kicked the foot plate; the wheelchair jerked backward. At the same

time, Steve lifted Bart and Bart lost his grip on the arms of the chair. The wheelchair crashed into the side of the car. Steve held tight to Bart's arms, trying to shove Bart into the car.

Bart clenched his fist and swung it upward with all his strength, smashing Steve underneath the chin.

Steve's head snapped back and, with a sickening thud, struck the roof of the car.

Bart closed his eyes, expecting Steve to hit back. Instead, Steve's grip loosened and Bart fell over backward on the floor.

16

Steve landed on Bart's legs and didn't move. Bart pushed Steve, trying to roll him over. Steve groaned. Bart knew Steve could wake up at any time. He had to get away somehow, before that happened.

Bart twisted around until he was lying on his side. He leaned up on one elbow and shoved Steve as hard as he could. Steve groaned again and rolled over. Bart took hold of his pajama leg and pulled. One leg came free. Then he leaned the other way and pulled on the other leg. It came free, too.

Bart turned onto his stomach and used his arms to drag himself over to the wheelchair. He thought if he set the brakes, so the wheels wouldn't roll away from him, he might be able to pull himself up and into the chair.

When he reached for the brake, he saw that one rear wheel of the chair was caught in the fender of the car. He pulled forward on the chair's foot plate, trying to free the spokes that were caught. The chair wouldn't move.

Bart dragged himself to the side of the wheelchair and pulled sideways on the other wheel to see if that would free the chair.

His plan worked too well. The spoke came free but Bart was pulling so hard on the wheel, the entire chair tipped over on its side.

Steve groaned and moved again. Bart knew he couldn't waste any more time trying to get in the wheelchair. He would have to leave the wheelchair there and get back to the elevator.

Using his forearms, he pulled himself slowly across the concrete floor, with his legs dragging behind. Twice he stopped and looked back over his shoulder. Steve was still lying on the floor beside the car.

Bart reached the elevator and raised his hand to push the button. He couldn't reach it. No matter how he stretched, his arm was not long enough. He banged on the closed elevator door but, of course, no one heard him.

He knew he couldn't wait. Visiting hours ended long ago and the nurses wouldn't change shifts again until seven o'clock in the morning. It might be hours before anyone rode the elevator to the parking garage.

He looked around for a place to hide. If he could stay out of sight, Steve might come to and think Bart had gone for help. Maybe he would leave, without even looking for Bart.

There were a few other cars in the garage, but he didn't see how to use them as a hiding place. He couldn't get underneath a car without using his legs and he wasn't sure he could get in one, either, even if one were unlocked.

Then he saw a door with a sign that said, "Stairs." He dragged himself to the door. It opened with a bar.

Bart stretched his hand up. He reached the bar and pulled it down. The door opened a few inches. He stuck his head through and then pulled the rest of his body through, too.

One at a time, Bart hauled himself up the stairs. He put one elbow on the next step up and hung onto the edge of the step while he put the other arm one step higher. Step, by step, by step.

His arms and shoulders ached from the effort, and he knew his legs were going to be badly bruised from bouncing against the steps. Still, he kept going. He came to a landing, crossed it, turned, and began crawling up the rest of the stairs.

As he hauled himself slowly upward, he realized how much he wanted to live. Bart didn't know if Steve was capable of murder but he wasn't going to take the chance. In spite of the accident, in spite of being paralyzed, Bart wanted to live.

He thought of how Kandi went to school after her baby died and learned to be a nurse. She was a good nurse, too. Bart thought she was the best nurse in the whole hospital.

Kandi told him to make the most of what he had left. That's what she had done, and Bart decided he would do it, too. He wanted to finish school and train with Mr. Peters. He wanted to see Lisa

again and find a job. He wanted to compete in a race again.

Bart's breath came in short gasps now. Arm up. Pull. Other arm up. Pull.

Bart decided to start training for Bloomsday as soon as he could. If Mr. Peters was willing to help him, Bart would give it a try. Maybe he could train on his own, too, like he did for cross-country. He might not be the best runner in the state, but maybe he could be the best wheelchair athlete.

Below him, he heard a door open. He put his arm on the next step and pulled himself up. He could see the top now. He could see the door that would lead into the first floor of the hospital. If he could just get to that door before Steve came up the stairs behind him, he would be all right.

Arm up. Pull. Other arm up. Pull. Sweat dripped from Bart's face and the back of his pajama top stuck to his body. Just as he reached the top step, he heard the footsteps behind him. Someone was coming, taking the steps two at a time.

Bart reached forward and stuck his fingers into the crack between the door and wall. He pulled as hard as he could but the door wouldn't open far enough for him to get hold of it.

He pounded on the closed door with his fists. "Help!" he cried. "Somebody help me!"

17

I did it! That's all Bart could think the next morning: I did it!

Every muscle ached and there were big bruises all over him, but he felt great.

He had saved himself. All alone, he had outsmarted the man in the white jacket. Despite the fact that his legs were paralyzed, he had found a way to escape.

A nurse had heard his call for help. She ran to the door. As she opened it, a young woman shouted up the stairs, "Send help to the garage."

Bart paused and took a deep breath. The man wasn't chasing him after all; it was a woman.

"There's a sick man lying on the floor," she called, as she rushed around the corner and across the landing. She continued up the stairs and then saw Bart. She stopped, looking astonished. "There's another one," she said.

Bart quickly explained what had happened.

The hospital security guards found Steve in the brown car, still groggy, trying to put the key in the ignition. They held him until the police arrived.

"We checked his fingerprints," Sgt. Wills told Bart later. "He's not a small-time burglar like his partner. This guy's wanted in three states for armed robbery."

Bart gulped.

"You were lucky," Sgt. Wills said. "We found a gun in his car. He probably didn't take it along while he pretended to be a doctor, for fear someone would spot it and ask questions. Once he got you in the car, you never would have been able to get away."

Ever since the accident, Bart had felt helpless. There were so many things he couldn't do alone, and he hated asking for help. Now he no longer felt so helpless. If he could fight Steve and win . . . if he could drag himself up a full flight of stairs . . . then he could do lots of other things, too.

That afternoon, Mr. Peters came again. "Wait until you see what I have," he said. He sounded like he'd found a million dollars.

It was a magazine, *Sports 'n' Spokes,* with articles on wheelchair basketball and tennis.

"These guys do everything," Mr. Peters said. "Archery. Scuba diving. Softball. Look. They even go skiing!"

Bart looked. It was true. Every page showed people in wheelchairs, participating in sports. The magazine made Bart feel less like a freak. Lots of other people had handicaps, too, and they played games. They competed in sports. They had fun.

"Have you thought any more about training?" Mr. Peters asked.

Bart nodded. "If you want to help me, I want to try."

"Good." Mr. Peters flipped the pages of the magazine. "Read this article about racing wheelchairs. It tells what to look for and where to get one. If you start training now, you should be ready for Bloomsday next spring."

Bloomsday. Bart wondered if he would ever really make it or if he was just kidding himself. Even if he trained with Mr. Peters and worked all year, he still had one big problem. Money.

"Kandi," he said, when she came on duty, "I need to win the lottery."

"So do I. So does everyone else I know."

"I have to get my hands on some money. Fast."

"What's the big deal about money all of a sudden? I thought Mr. Whitney's insurance company was going to pay your hospital expenses."

"It is. But I want a racing wheelchair. Look." He pointed to a picture in the magazine. "This one only weighs 14 pounds. The wheel rims and spokes are reshaped to reduce wind resistance. It even has a bucket seat."

"Sounds to me like you want a Ferrari when a Ford would do."

"If I'm going to be an athlete, I have to get the proper equipment. This is a first-class machine."

A first-class machine. Less than a week ago, Bart had referred to his own body as a first-class machine. It seemed like another lifetime.

"How much will one of those first-class machines cost you?"

"About $1,700. I can't say exactly, because most of them are custom made to fit the person."

"Seventeen hundred dollars! You *do* need to win the lottery. Either that or you'd better get a part-time job."

Bart sighed. "I couldn't find a job before. Who's going to hire me now? What kind of work could I do?"

"Computers," Kandi said. "Learn about computers. You don't need legs to use a computer."

"I don't know anything about computers."

"You can learn. Doesn't your school have a computer class?"

"I don't know. Probably."

"So take it. Get an A. You'll need to be good if you expect to get hired."

"I never get A's, except in P.E."

"Maybe the old Bart didn't get A's, but I'll bet the new Bart can."

Bart couldn't imagine himself getting an A. He couldn't imagine finding a job, either.

"Do you really think someone would hire me?" Bart asked. "Be honest, now. Why would they hire *me* when they could hire someone who can walk?"

Kandi looked him square in the eye. "They'll hire you if you're the best person for the job," she said.

Bart nodded. He would have to make himself the best person for the job, whatever job it was. If he didn't, he'd never have the money for a racing chair, and he'd never make it to Bloomsday.

18

Lisa and her mother visited Bart in the hospital. Mrs. Hanson called first to say they were coming, which gave Bart plenty of time to get nervous. He cut himself shaving and complained to Kandi that he needed a haircut.

"I thought you didn't have a special girlfriend," Kandi said.

"I don't."

"Then why are you getting so worked up?"

"I'm not worked up!" Bart said. "I'm just. . . ."

"Calm, cool, and collected," Kandi said. "I can tell." She smiled at him.

Bart combed his hair one more time.

"You look great," Kandi said. "You're the most handsome patient on the third floor. If that girl has any sense, she'll fall in love the minute she lays eyes on you."

"You stay out of here," Bart said. "And don't listen outside the door, either."

"Who, me?" Kandi said.

At that moment, Lisa walked in. "Hi, Bart," she said. Her mother was right behind her.

"You're right," Kandi said, as she left. "Lisa *is* beautiful."

It was all Bart could do not to throw his pillow at her. Lisa handed him a round tin box. "I baked these for you. I hope you like chocolate-chip cookies."

"They're my favorite kind," Bart said. "Thanks."

"We came to thank you," Mrs. Hanson said. "If you hadn't remembered that license number, Lisa would not be here tonight."

"You probably saved my life," Lisa said.

Bart and Lisa talked for a few minutes about Steve and how both of them had escaped from him.

"I'm just glad he's locked up," Mrs. Hanson said.

"I'm just glad he didn't hurt you," Bart said. He looked at Lisa. She was even prettier than he remembered.

"And I'm glad he didn't hurt *you,*" Lisa said.

"If you two will excuse me," Mrs. Hanson said, "I'll go get myself a cup of coffee and let you talk by yourselves for awhile." As she walked out of the room, Bart wondered whether Lisa had asked her mother to do that or if it was Mrs. Hanson's idea.

Lisa sat in the chair across from Bart's bed. "I miss talking to you at the lockers every day," she said.

"I've missed you, too."

"I'm sorry about your accident. And I want you to know it doesn't change how I feel about you."

Lisa looked down at her hands. "I mean, I still want to—to be your friend."

She said it shyly, and Bart knew she really meant she wanted to be more than a friend.

"Lisa," he said, "you are the prettiest girl I've ever seen. And the nicest."

She looked up and smiled at him.

He grinned back at her. This visit was going better than he'd expected. "If I could get out of this bed," he said, "I'd walk over there and kiss you."

She stared at him. Bart was afraid he'd pushed his luck. What had made him say a stupid thing like that?

Then Lisa stood up and walked over to Bart. She leaned toward him and pressed her lips gently against his. He put his hands on her arms. She was warm and soft and smelled like roses.

Bart wondered if she could hear his heart thumping.

Without saying a word, Lisa sat down again. Bart felt like clapping or shouting or whistling through his teeth. Instead, he opened the box of cookies and ate one.

When Mrs. Hanson returned, she said, "I have something for you." She took an envelope out of her purse and handed it to him. His name was typed on the envelope. The return address was printed: Hall & Grey, Inc.

"Who are Hall and Grey?" Bart asked.

"Go ahead," Lisa said, "open it."

Bart opened the envelope and removed a check from Hall & Grey, Inc. It was made out to Bart Collins, for $2,000.

"It's the reward money," Mrs. Hanson explained. "I've worked for Dr. Hall and Dr. Grey for ten years and they put up this money to help find Lisa."

Bart stared at the check. He'd never seen a check for that much money, let alone one that was made out to him.

"When you called and told me about the van," Mrs. Hanson said, "you earned the reward."

"I didn't expect any reward," he said. "I just wanted to help Lisa."

"We know that. But Dr. Hall and Dr. Grey agreed that without your help, Lisa might not be with us. You deserve every penny of the reward."

"That's for sure," Lisa said.

"There's just one catch," Mrs. Hanson said. "Both the doctors said they don't want this to be spent on bills or on anything you *must* have. They said the necessary things will get paid for, one way or another. This money is to be used for something fun—something you *want,* whether you need it or not."

Bart felt a prickle of excitement on the back of his neck.

"What do you think you'll do with it?" Lisa asked.

"I'm going to buy a racing wheelchair," he said. "And next year, in May, I'm going to be in the Bloomsday race."

19

Going home was hard. Nothing was right for a person in a wheelchair. The sinks were too high. Bart couldn't reach the hangers in his closet. He needed a bar on the bathroom wall so he could hoist himself in and out of his chair. A special ramp had to be built on the two steps that led to the front door.

Mr. Hobart, Bart's principal, brought over the money the kids at school had contributed to the special fund. There was enough to make the necessary changes in Bart's home.

"I'm going to miss you," Kandi told him the day he left the hospital.

"You'll have to find somebody else to boss around, now." He was going to miss Kandi, too.

"Good luck, Bart. I'll watch for your name on the sports page."

"And I'll watch for yours in the birth announcements."

"Call me sometime and tell me how you're doing. Let me know when you get a job and when you make it to Bloomsday."

Bart promised he would. He noticed she didn't say *if* you get a job or *if* you make it to Bloomsday; she said *when* you make it. Kandi truly believed he would do what he wanted to do. Yes, he was going to miss Kandi a lot.

About a month after he left the hospital, he began training with Mr. Peters. He lifted weights. He wheeled himself around the school gymnasium, as fast as he could. He started with 2 laps and worked up to 20.

Most days, Dan went along and worked out with him. "I need to get in shape," Dan said. "Maybe I'll even enter one of those races you're always talking about."

He hardly ever saw Gordon anymore. When Gordon found out that Bart and Dan no longer wanted to drink and smoke pot, he looked for new buddies to party with.

That summer, Bart trained outdoors. "You have to practice going up hills if you expect to be ready for Bloomsday," Mr. Peters said.

The only hill close to his home was half a mile long. The first time he tried to push himself up it, he barely made it to the top. But by the end of the summer, he could go up twice in a row without getting tired.

In September, he ordered his racing wheelchair. Mr. Peters helped him select it. They spent days studying the various kinds and finally decided on one called the Shadow Racer.

Maggie screamed for a week when she found out how much it cost. "You already have one wheelchair," she said.

"My regular wheelchair isn't built for racing," Bart said. "And I only spent the reward money, nothing more."

"Think how many clothes and toys you could buy for my kids with that much money."

"If you want to buy toys," Bart said, "why don't you find a job and earn the money?"

"Look who's talking," Maggie said. "I don't see you coming up with any job."

She was right about that. Although Bart had applied for several part-time jobs, so far he had not been called even for an interview.

Fall quarter, Bart took two computer classes. He liked working on computers. He did a project for extra credit and sometimes stayed after school to practice. When he got A's in both classes, he took general business and accounting classes from the same teacher.

His teacher told the students to apply for jobs early. "Don't wait until June," she said. "Apply now."

I am, I am, Bart thought.

One day the teacher had a list of companies that hired high school graduates without experience.

Bart looked to see if any of the places he had applied to were on it. When he got to the bottom of the list, he stopped. He read the last line again.

Whitney Construction Co., it said, Fred Whitney, owner.

Bart called Mr. Whitney that same day.

"I don't know if you remember me," Bart said.

"Of course I do."

"I'll graduate in June," Bart said, "and I'm looking for a job. Does your company need any help?"

"I'm sorry, Bart," Mr. Whitney said. "All we need is a roofer."

Bart tried not to sound too disappointed. "I can't do roofing," he said. "But I know I can do very well at a bookkeeping or word-processing job."

"Word processing? Do you know how to use a computer?"

"Yes. I took business classes this year."

"Hold on a minute. My office manager might need some help."

In a few moments, Mr. Whitney came back on the line. "Can you come in tomorrow for an interview?"

Bart went. He talked with Mr. Whitney and then with Mr. Whitney's office manager. She asked about his classes, his grades, and which software programs he had used. Then she had him run some sales figures through the company computer.

Mr. Whitney called Bart at home that night. "How does part time until school gets out and full time after that sound? How soon can you start?"

"Would tomorrow be soon enough?" Bart asked.

"I want you to know," Mr. Whitney said, "that I'm not hiring you because of the accident. I'm a businessman and I have to hire the best person for the job. My office manager thinks you're it."

Bart could hardly wait to call Kandi and tell her.

20

Bloomsday!

As Bart attached his number to his shirt, he could hardly believe he was there. He was really going to compete in Bloomsday, the world's largest timed road race.

About 60,000 people were in the race with him. Bart looked around at the mobs of runners doing leg stretches and other warm-up exercises. For a moment, he felt a deep sadness. He would give anything in the world if he could be *running* this race instead of competing in the wheelchair division.

So much had happened in the 15 months since his accident. Sometimes he felt like he was a different person from the one who had too much to drink and ran out in front of a car. If only he could live that one day over again and do it differently.

He pushed the thought out of his mind. There was no point thinking about what might have been.

For a while, he hadn't been sure he would ever make it to Bloomsday, no matter how determined he was. But he had trained faithfully and hard,

rain or shine. On school days, he worked at Whitney Construction from 3:30 until 5:30 and then put in an hour in his racing chair. On weekends, he tried to train at least four hours each day. He also competed in several local races.

Every week, he gave part of his earnings to his mother to help with expenses. He often bought a small toy or treat for Maggie's boys, too. The kids were still naughty, but it didn't bother him like it used to. He had too much to do to concern himself with small problems. Besides, he felt sorry for the boys. It wasn't their fault Maggie was an airhead.

The part-time job made it easy to save enough money for gas, motel, and other expenses for Bloomsday. He had called Kandi to tell her he was going.

"I have news, too," she said. "I'm pregnant. The baby's due in October."

Mr. Peters offered to drive Bart to Spokane. Dan was there, too, somewhere in the crowd of runners. And Lisa. Lisa wasn't a runner, but she rode over with them and promised she would be at the finish line to cheer for him.

"I may finish last," Bart warned her.

"You came in third in your last race. Why would you finish last?"

"That was a much smaller race. Bloomsday attracts people from all over the world. I just want to be in it, to finish it. I don't even care what my time is."

"You," Lisa said, "are a winner."

Bart shook his head. "Don't get your hopes up like that," he said. "I'm not experienced enough to win this race yet. Maybe in a few years I'll have a chance, if I keep training and racing, but not this year."

"I didn't mean you'd win this race," Lisa said. "You're a winner because you're here. It doesn't matter when you cross the finish line." She smiled at him. "Some people are winners because they don't give up, no matter what happens to them. You're like that. It makes me proud of you."

Bart kissed her and wondered how he ever got so lucky.

He took his place with the other wheelchair athletes for the start of the race. For safety reasons, they started together, away from the runners.

He saw Mr. Peters in the distance, holding both hands in the air and giving him the thumbs-up sign.

I'm here, Bart thought. *I'm in the Bloomsday race.* His heart beat faster. Although he couldn't stand up, he felt ten feet tall. He grinned and waved at Mr. Peters.

He positioned himself in his Shadow Racer.

Lisa was right. It didn't matter when he crossed the finish line.

Bart had already won.

About the author

Peg Kehret has published nonfiction books, novels for young people, and hundreds of stories and articles in national magazines. Her award-winning plays have been produced in all fifty states and Canada.

Ms. Kehret lives near Seattle, Washington. She is best known for her books, *Winning Monologs for Young Actors, ENCORE!,* and *Deadly Stranger,* as well as her plays, *Spirit!, Bicycles Built for Two,* and *Dracula, Darling.*

As a teenage polio patient, Ms. Kehret spent many months in a wheelchair.

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Smitty

Mark looked at her. He didn't fully understand this pretty girl or what drove her. She was as intense a player as he'd ever seen. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to take her out on a date, after all. But he'd find out Saturday night. He knew one thing, though. She was one amazing basketball player.

Rookie Summer

Bobby really hadn't thought about these things, or about missing them. Baseball always had been number one with him. And it always had been fun. But part of the fun was hanging out with Josh and his other friends after the game. It sure wasn't the same with the Giants.

The Winner

For a moment, as Bart looked at the Bloomsday brochure, he forgot about the accident. The old dreams came back and he felt a surge of excitement as he thought of actually running in Bloomsday.

Then he saw a photo of a girl in a wheelchair, and he remembered. His hand started to shake and he laid the pamphlet on his bed. He looked at Mr. Peters. Was this some kind of joke?

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The Winner

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Well-known novelist Peg Kehret gives the reader an insightful, sensitive look at how a young person comes to terms with an overwhelming disability.

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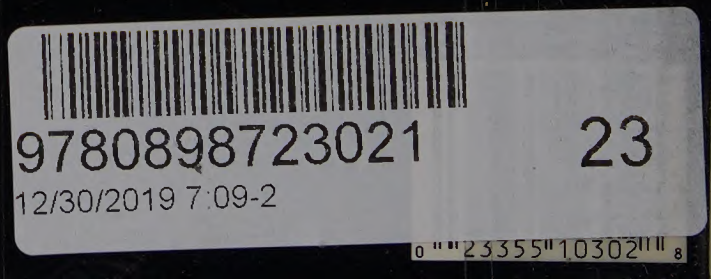
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